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ABSTRACT

Reading professional literature may be undertaken without a large investment of time or money, yet it still provides a way to increase one's professional knowledge and maintain competencies. To be successful in one's reading, the adult education practitioner needs to consider three aspects of a professional reading program: finding the time, locating the resources, and using effective reading strategies. Three simple, yet effective, time-management techniques--scheduling, planning, and prioritizing--help the practitioner overcome one of the biggest obstacles to reading--finding the time. Practitioners may obtain reading materials through publishers, memberships in professional organizations, or from the library. The following are some shortcuts to professional reading: read book reviews and capsules; get on publishers' mailing lists; make use of abstracts; scan, skim, and skip; and follow leads. The following techniques require more time: use critical reading skills; learn with others; and apply the three-step approach--(1) know what to look for in evaluating research; (2) follow the "three times philosophy": expect to read the research article more than once; and (3) learn the language of research. (Contains 18 references.) (YLB)

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Enhancing Professional Development Through Reading Professional Literature

by Susan B. Slusarski

> Professional development does not mean the simple acquisition of new factual knowledge. Rather, it is a dynamic process of learning that leads to a new level of understanding or mastery and a heightened awareness of the context in which educators work that may compel them to examine accepted policies and routines (Duke, 1990, p. 71).

Adult education is an emerging field which draws from several disciplines and has a growing knowledge base. The adult education practitioner faces new challenges with this information overload. The practitioner needs to "keep up with an area of specialization *and* with the general literature of adult education as a social practice." (Stubblefield, 1991, p. 25, italics added). Although there are many avenues for professional development such as conferences, graduate courses, seminars, and workshops, reading professional literature may be undertaken without a large investment of time or money, yet still provides a way to increase one's professional knowledge and maintain competencies. To be successful in one's reading, the practitioner needs to consider three aspects of a professional reading program: finding the time, locating the resources, and using effective reading strategies.

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Finding the Time

"I would read the journals, if only I had the time!" In a busy day, finding time for reading may seem difficult, but it is not impossible. Applying basic time-management techniques of scheduling, planning, and prioritizing will help.

Scheduling

By scheduling a time to read, you make a commitment to read. You might designate one day a week to eat lunch at your desk and read. Or, set aside a daily fifteen-minute reading time, such as the last fifteen minutes before you leave work. Or, choose a block of time once a week, for example, every Friday afternoon from 1-2:30 p.m., as uninterrupted reading time. Have you noticed a quiet time slot in your week? You might want to schedule your reading time then.

Planning

In addition to planning a time to read, you also need to plan to *have* reading material. If you are new to the field, Stubblefield (1991, p. 26) recommends the Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education (Merriam & Cunningham, 1989) as a good orientation to the literature in the field; this is a volume to order, own, and keep on your bookshelf. As you collect reading materials, set up a reading file folder or drawer or even a reading briefcase! Then, you will be ready both for the scheduled reading time, as well as for unexpected "windows" of time (such as when a meeting is canceled) or even the extra five minutes before an

appointment. Another trick: carry some reading material with you at all times. Be prepared.

Prioritizing

In selecting reading from the vast array available, you will want to consider what is important in your professional career. In general, the main purposes for reading professional literature include: (1) reading to learn new information (general knowledge), (2) reading to find answers to specific questions (specific information), (3) reading to become aware of new ideas and trends (keeping current), and (4) reading to relax or distract one from the daily routines (Gessner & Armstrong, 1992, p. 78-79). A needs assessment of your own professional development[1] is in order. What are your current interests? Are you developing an area of specialization? What are your long range goals? What are your objectives for the year? What projects are you involved with that you might like to research? And, conversely, what areas are you unfamiliar with? Answering questions like these will help you set your priorities.

You also might consider analyzing your reading habits and situation. In "Encouraging Reading for Professional Development," Womack & Chandler (1992) provide a survey that examines reading habits (*"I read a minimum of three articles from professional journals each month."*), enhancers of professional reading (*"The administrators where I work see professional reading as an important part of my professional development."*), detractors from professional reading that

are *inherent* to the material (*"Statistics are easy for me to follow."*), and detractors from professional reading that are *external* to the material (*"If I read a good idea there is a good chance that I will get to try it out."*). Your responses to the survey questions would provide a quick diagnostic look at your current professional reading status.

These three simple yet effective time-management techniques--scheduling, planning, and prioritizing--will help you overcome one of a practitioner's biggest obstacles to reading--finding the time.

Locating the Resources

The four types of professional reading resources are: (1) books, (2) journals and other periodicals, (3) dissertations, and (4) "fugitive" materials, such as reports and conference proceedings (Imel, 1991, p. 16-17). You may obtain reading materials through publishers, memberships in professional organizations, or from the library. Stubblefield suggests: "the best way to gain access to current literature is through membership in professional associations" (1991, p. 32). For example, membership in the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) includes a subscription to the *Adult Education Quarterly (AEQ)* and *Adult Learning*. Most professional associations offer personal or institutional memberships, so you might encourage your department to join several associations and set up a professional library. Or, several people in your department may

subscribe to different publications and share them among the group (Brockett, 1986, p. 10). If you are unfamiliar with the variety of journals in the field, consult the RE/ACE Journal Index for Adult and Continuing Education Research in the library.

To locate resources for a specific topic, make use of the library, information data bases such as PsychLit and SocAbstracts, and clearinghouses such as ERIC. The depth of your search will depend on your needs. In selecting the resources you plan to read, consider the following criteria: authority of the source, timeliness, relevance, depth, accuracy, and replicability (Imel, 1991, p. 22). A good rule of thumb for conducting your search is to review the literature for the last five-year period.

Certainly, the most convenient way to locate resources for your professional reading is to have the materials arrive at your desk! Nonetheless, a visit to the library and help from a well-trained librarian will assist you in locating the information you need.

Doing the Reading

Here are some strategies, some shortcuts and "longcuts," you may take to be more effective in your professional reading efforts.

Some Shortcuts to Professional Reading

There are several ways to shortcut your reading.

1. Read book reviews and capsules. A book review provides a summary and analysis of the book, the book's strengths and weaknesses, and an indication of who would find the book worthwhile. Most journals include a section on book reviews. For example, the *Continuing Higher Education Review*, the quarterly journal of the National University Continuing Education Association (NUCEA), has a column on "New Books in Higher Education." Similarly, *Training and Development*, the monthly magazine of the American Association for Training and Development (ASTD), features a column called, "Research Capsules" that provides summaries of current research.

2. Get on publisher's mailing lists. Publishers such as Jossey-Bass, Krieger, and Sage Publications often provide a description, the table of contents, or even a synopsis of each new book published. Use this information to identify current areas of interest and new trends in the field and to guide your selection of books--or even book reviews--to read.

3. Make use of abstracts. If you are interested in a particular topic, use the many library reference books and information data bases which provide abstracts of journal articles. From the abstract, you can usually decide if the article is related to your interests and worth reading. One newsletter service that provides abstracts of journal articles is Advanced Personnel Systems (California) which monitors over 200 journals for articles on training and development and publishes abstracts in the newsletter, "Training and Development Alert."

4. Scan, Skim, and Skip. When you have selected a book or journal to read, SCAN the table of contents first.[2] Perhaps only one chapter or one article seems related to your current needs. SKIM the chapter or article. If it really is of interest, copy the material and add it to your reading file. SKIP the rest!

5. Follow leads. If you read a good book or article, make use of the reference list at the end for other titles/resources in your area of interest. You may uncover some well-known studies that have become classics in the field or you may find new leads to pursue. If several articles reference the same book, that book is probably one worth exploring.

Some "Longcuts" to Professional Reading

The value of investing more time in professional reading is from the understanding you gain, so that you may apply new knowledge and improve your practice. Here are some techniques that will help you.

1. Use critical reading skills. Read the material with the attitude that you want to gain useful information. Knowles (1975, p.101) provides a "proactive" technique for reading a book. He suggests not only scanning the table of contents, but also examining the chapters themselves, the graphs, the appendices, and even the index to gain an overview of the material. Develop some questions about the material which you hope to answer as you read. Read to find the answers. The same technique could be applied to a journal article. Your goal is to identify the main idea and relate the findings to your experience.

Taking notes or keeping a reading log are two ways to reinforce your reading efforts.

2. *Apply the Three-Step Approach.* The Three-Step Approach to reading journal articles (Slusarski, 1992) provides a method for getting more out of reading research.

Step One: Know what to look for in evaluating research. Recognize the purposes and phases of research. The purpose of research is simply to learn more about a phenomenon. The three phases of the research process include the planning or logic of the study, the execution or implementation of the research design, and the results and/or significance of the research. An excellent introduction to reading research is "A Brief Guide to Critiquing Research" (Hayes, 1991).

Step Two: Follow the "Three Times Philosophy": expect to read the research article more than once! The first time, read to the end to get an idea of where the writer is headed. The second time, read to identify the research purpose and process--What was the study about? How did they go about it? Are the findings significant? And finally, with the third reading, decide how the findings could (or could not) be applied in your situation.

Step Three: Learn the language of research. Actually, what keeps many practitioners from reading research is the technical language. Yet, if you wanted to visit France, you might purchase Berlitz tapes to "Learn French in Thirty Days" in order to get more out of your

trip. Apply the same principle to reading research. Take a short introductory course in research methods, purchase an introductory research text such as A Guide to Research for Educators and Trainers of Adults (Merriam and Simpson, 1984, 1989), or read a book on statistics such as Statistics Without Tears: A Primer for Non-Mathematicians (Rowntree, 1981) or Reading Statistics and Research (Huck, Cormier, and Bounds, 1974). The idiosyncratic vocabulary used by researchers is actually a tool to convey meaning (for example, a significance level of $p=.20$ is not so good!). You need to understand the tool and how it is used--and practice using the tool--before you will be able to use the tool effectively. As Hayes states: "The process of reading and evaluating research requires knowledge and skills that are not acquired without deliberate effort." (1991, p. 35).

3. Learn with others. Reading is a solitary activity, yet the group experience can provide greater stimulation and analysis. Start, or join, a journal club. A journal club is similar to a study circle: the group convenes with a common purpose and interest, each meeting has a focus, and the mode of learning is collaborative. Journal clubs can be informal or set up formally if continuing education credit is desired (Kranstuber, 1982). The meetings may be structured in many ways: (a) each person reviews a different article in the same journal and summarizes the key points, strengths and weaknesses, and for whom it may be of interest; (b) each person reads the same article and one person serves as discussion leader; (c) each person reads the same

article but discusses the article from different positions such as *Clarifier, Advocate, Critic,* or *Applicator*; (d) each person reads a different article on the same topic; or (e) at each meeting, the group discusses a different chapter in a book.

As with any group activity, the success of the journal club lies in the members' commitment to the group and understanding of group process. A booklet which would be helpful to use in setting up a journal club is "Guidelines for Organizing and Leading a Study Circle" available from The Study Circles Resource Center. The synergy of a group activity "often results in new understanding of the material" (Hiemstra, 1987) and offers more input on how the research might be applied to practice.

Whether you choose shortcuts or longcuts, the key ingredient to professional reading is to "Just Do It."

Conclusion

Professional reading "allows one to become aware of the histories, contributing disciplines, and various issues of adult education" (Zeph, 1991, p. 86); provides opportunities for new levels of understanding; and encourages practitioners to examine their assumptions. Using some time-management techniques, knowing how to locate the resources, and implementing some strategies for effective reading will help the practitioner with reading the professional

literature. The benefits of professional development are many: to increase one's effectiveness, to improve one's practice, and to energize oneself. For the practitioner, professional development through reading the professional literature can serve as "a rich resource of insights, an antidote to burnout, and a pleasurable collegial experience" (Duke, 1991, p. 74). Enjoy!

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NOTES

[1] See Brockett, 1991, for suggestions on setting up a professional development program.

[2] At one university, the table of contents of appropriate journals in the library were copied monthly and routed through the department. Staff members indicated the articles they were interested in, and these articles were copied and circulated among the staff (Dennington & Elliot, 1988, p. 16).